



## Exploring interaction between young people of faith: Tools for understanding

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## **Exploring Interaction between Young People of Faith: Tools for Understanding?**

Dr Phil Henry

This chapter examines an interfaith initiative using some academic 'tools' based broadly within disciplines associated with symbolic interactionism. The case study examined here is part of a research project developed through the work of the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, in creating and supporting The Derby Interfaith Youth Forum (DIYF). In what follows, all the names of participants are pseudonyms as their identity is protected under the ethical agreement for researching with the group.

The complexity of interfaith relations in the UK (Francis et al, 2011) and elsewhere requires an appreciation of 'self-other' interaction and encounter. That is, if the intention is to move to a more sustained relationship-building environment for people with different faith orientations and with those without a professed faith. Examining individual and group identity enables such an approach and, it is argued here, is reinforced by providing additional tools for understanding derived from within the disciplines of sociology and social psychology.

The nature and exploration of identity within the social sciences is variously described, and often contested, as fluid, multi-faceted, hybrid, hyphenated, social and personal to name a few (Ashton et al, 2004; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Craib, 1998; Elliott and du Gay, 2009; Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2008; Woodward, 2002). The usefulness of identity as a concept has indeed been questioned against a background of failing to show cause and effect for actions associated with it (Brubaker, 2004). 'Does identity matter?' asks Jenkins (2008). In keeping with his question, this chapter examines the 'what is' and the 'how' of identity work, set against a background of 'identification'. It explores what we know and how young people of different faiths appreciate their own sense of self against historical discourses embedded in encounter,

and how they negotiate meaning making in an interfaith youth forum (Brah, 2007).

Symbolic Interactionism as a discipline focuses on work inspired by Interactionist perspectives on society and, in the context employed here, addresses the meaning of face-to-face encounter as a means to gain a better understanding of 'self-other' relationships. Identification with religious and cultural labels and their meaning for the individual and group (against a background of secularising institutions and influences) are often primary in complex interactions. By examining the interactions within an Interfaith Youth Forum it is possible to see what shapes and sustains conduct within such a group that could benefit youth work practitioners and others in the field.

### **The UK Interfaith Context**

Interfaith activity in the UK is highlighted in part by what Weller (2005; 2008) refers to as 'Christian, secular and religiously plural'; a three-dimensional socio-religious landscape where private, public and civil society intersect. Interfaith organisations have a relatively short but notable history since 1900, when the International Association for Religious Freedom was formed (previous examples existed but in relative isolation prior to this). Many bi-lateral and tri-lateral groups were established after the First World War and some in direct response to the Holocaust of the Second World War. Organisations included The London Society of Jews and Christians (1927), The World Congress of Faiths (1936), The Council of Christians and Jews (1942). In the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the numbers of organisations seeking to work together for the common good on the basis of shared values has increased dramatically, from around thirty in 1987 to approximately two hundred and forty today (Pearce, 2012). The most significant of these is the national umbrella organisation, The Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN), established in 1987. The IFN supports the active engagement of faith communities, national, regional and local as well as a commitment to education at all levels. It has overseen the public space for the voice of religion and belief groups (including the smaller more

marginal organisations) and as a result has had a role to play in the creation and shaping of public policy by the last two UK governments. Other organisations including the Three Faiths Forum, St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, Christian-Muslim Forum and Hindu-Christian Forum have all taken positions as dialogic groups to foster better understanding within and across both Abrahamic and Dharmic traditions. Local town and citywide Faiths Forums and Councils have sprung up since the early 1990s and, as a consequence, policy-makers have harnessed the messages of cohesion and engaged such groups in contributing to stronger, safer societies.

These organisational responses to interfaith dialogue and debate still lack a wider community engagement at local level given their often very small numbers of active participants, despite so-called assertions of numerical representation. They do however endeavour to sustain grassroots activity, but are sometimes open to accusations, with some notable exceptions, of 'talking' rather than 'doing', particularly when it comes to tangible projects working together in communities. Interfaith youth work, unlike single faith youth work is less well developed. Successive governments in conjunction with IFN UK have sponsored initiatives such as Interfaith Week since 2009, and have encouraged greater youth participation, and a greater general connection to people of no particular faith orientation to extend the reach of Interfaith Week participation. In concentrated efforts Interfaith Week produces a significant number of youth-related events during that period (Interfaith Network, 2011). There are between 30-50 youth groups actively promoting interfaith youth work in England. However, of those, many are located in schools and colleges or in higher education institutions.

### **Derby Interfaith Youth Forum (DIYF)**

The development of an interfaith youth forum in Derby in 2009/2010 was as a direct result of two intertwined motivating factors. First, the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby had received several requests from young adults to create a loosely defined youth organisation where volunteering opportunities

could be created. Second, some of those who sought this course of action supported a successful bid to Volunteering England (VE) with the Multi-Faith Centre, as part of a year long funded pilot project to explore the potential of faith-based volunteering among young people of faith in England between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. The DIYF only recruits between the ages of 18-24, in keeping with the ethos of a higher education campus, which supports many 'young adults' as a distinct life stage between youth and adulthood (Heath et al, 2009: 4). The organisation is not a Youth Worker led organisation even though it employs a qualified youth worker as its project officer.

It is in the context of the group's development that a separate research initiative developed through the many activities that the Interfaith forum undertook in that first year (between 2010-2011). Many observations, comments, questions and discussions revealed significant negotiation and construction of 'self-other' relationships in the group. This is of increased interest in light of the lack of literature on the topic of interfaith youth encounter and faith-based volunteering. The research explored a number of aspects, including issues relating to tensions, stigma, stereotyping and representations and the implications for self-identity, and meaning making.

### ***Group demographics***

There were 64 active participants in the youth forum in the first year who self-defined as Muslim (39), Sikh (5), Christian (9), Black Christian (3), Jain (1) and those non-affiliated (7). The demographic make-up of the group and wider research material and findings in relation to the group cannot be included here due to constraints of space.

After the formal project funding came to an end in August 2010 the numbers slowly shrank to between ten and fifteen (by 2012). However, of those that remain committed to the youth forum, all were part of it from its inception and when asked about continued commitment have commented thus:

*The people in the group have become real friends, I feel like I've know them a long time now, and even if we sometimes struggle to get everyone together, we know we have a good relationship and I enjoy seeing everyone (Elana, January 2012).*

*I wanted to find out about other faiths but never had a chance till I met the people here; we get on and have worked hard to have more than just a dialogue. Sometimes that has been hard work but I keep coming because others do, we can share a lot even if we only get together once a month now (Kamran, December 2011).*

*I'd still come to meetings and eat pizza even if there were only two or three of us turning up; it really makes a difference to meet everyone and share food and thoughts about our worlds especially when we are doing things together. (Moussa, October 2011).*

The openness and recognition of relationships out of which friendship patterns have been created and opportunities to meet in surroundings outside those regularly ascribed to individuals from different backgrounds cannot be underestimated. The genuine resolve to see each other, to share food (however basic) and explore with others their experiences is significant to motivate participation.

### **Symbolic Interactionism: tools for understanding**

In order to appreciate how Symbolic Interactionism (SI) might be used to understand conduct in faith-based youth work (and youth work more generally) it is important to briefly examine SI conceptually. It is a sociological theory and was fashioned out of the work of a number of philosophers and social psychologists, but not labelled until the late 1960s. It has its roots in philosophical pragmatism (largely an American conception), associated with John Dewey (1910) and William James (1902), and to a lesser-known extent with George Herbert Mead (1934). Mead published little in his lifetime, but has received recognition posthumously as a direct result of his students collecting his works together and publishing them in *Mind, Self and Society* after his

death in 1931. Probably the best-known exponent of his work was Herbert Blumer, who took it upon himself to examine Mead's work. Out of it Blumer coined the term 'Symbolic Interactionism' and identified a general approach to human group life and human conduct (1969: 1). It acknowledges the encounter between human beings, during which signs and symbols of that encounter (physical, verbal and non-verbal) are used to make meaning between us.

SI addresses the subjective meanings imposed in our interpretation of what Erving Goffman (1959: 15) called the 'definition of the situation'. In any given interaction the participants of that encounter will define the situation according to a range of categories, situationally located in the interaction, and in their understanding of the status of the participants and the implication for the symbolic meaning associated with it. Its origins are often seen in the work of Max Weber (1864-1920) who suggested that individuals seek meaning in their interpretation of the world and act according to that interpretation (Bendix, 1946). Symbolic interactionist theory allows sociologists to examine the micro-sociological detail of encounter. It does however have its critics who assume that such small scale interaction is often in danger of missing the bigger social picture, of 'not seeing the wood for the trees'. Its value in small scale group work, like the youth interfaith forum, is in uncovering what symbolic meaning people develop and rely upon in their interaction with each other.

Understanding something of another's 'definition of the situation' legitimises an individual interaction (if not the individual concerned), and has the potential to create authentic encounter between individuals before any consideration of labels associated with perceptions of others is implied. The confidence developed through interaction enhances the skills of those in the group to recognise intentionally conveyed misinformation by either feigning or deceit. It also helps them to assess the promissory character of personal face-to-face encounter, which may later, when the individual is not in their presence, allow inferences which make a meaningful attempt to measure the true value of that encounter (Goffman, 1959: 14). Many judgements and decisions associated with experience come through inference. Although implicitly and inherently

applied by most people, few of us analyse how important inference is to our ability to decide what is appropriate in encounters and its effect on intention. Volition informs, and is informed by, action(s) in encounter and interaction. The cognitive process affecting our consciousness completes a cycle of 'action-intention-action'.

DIYF members created spaces with the support of workers where it became an acceptable part of their interaction to ask the difficult questions about a range of topics, without fear of offending or of being perceived as voyeuristic in their intention. This correlates directly with learning how to read and respond to the symbolism associated with words and gesture. This includes understandings about aspects of faith and how they affect thinking about topics such as: gender segregation, euthanasia, abortion, sexual health, the environment, women in religion or violent extremism (to name only a few). It also reflects more mundane enquiries by group members about why certain forms of dress are associated with some religions and not others, why there is controversy in the public discourse about the wearing of open and full face veils (hijab and niqab), or why the Mormon (Latter Day Saints) religious experience is dogged with questions about polygamous marriages?

The religious and cultural influences on individuals' lives can be associated with their familial background, cultural affirmation or denial of their heritage, or a continual shift between broad categories of understanding about the self. For example, we might shift between understandings of the self as an objective 'me' or a subjective 'I' and where the self fits into the multiplicity of identities we connect with and are connected with through our life course and worldview. This is often described by Interactionists as 'identity work'.

There are three key aspects to take account of in understanding interactions, these are adopted by Blumer from Mead and explained thus:

- 1) That human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them; 2) that the meanings of such*



*things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows, and 3) that these meanings are handled in and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (Blumer, 1969: 2)*

The question of acting towards objects which have meanings associated with them allows the actor to derive meaning according to the situation in which the encounter takes place; 'defining the situation'. There was an encounter, for example, where a male in the group appeared to want to 'define the situation' by presenting his version of what he might see as the prevailing view, apparently assuming his 'definition of the situation' had the moral authority over the views he claims are held by others. He asserted that females had less of a role to play in religious life than males. The meaning and the interpretative framework used in such an encounter are fundamental when shaping responses, actions and attitudes among groups and individuals. The female in that particular interaction responds by challenging the prevailing view and that of her male colleague, both in the verbal and non-verbal responses she provides. At the point of interaction is the space in which we learn how she reads and recognises what her male associate both 'gives' and 'gives off' (Goffman, 1959: 14) in the cues (verbal and non-verbal) he presents and in the message he is expressing. The skill of the female participant in this encounter is to formulate a response which depends on her assessing the initial information one first acquires in the interaction. This initial information commits the male participant to the type of projection he is offering without pretence, and as the interaction progresses the female can, through reading the initial line of enquiry, modify or add in information in making a case for a contrary view. In order to avoid the 'definition of the situation' becoming too disrupted or even breaking down (which could then create a more embedded potential conflict) there may be a necessity for subtle positioning which requires the use of the moral character or imperative associated with the interaction. In other words if, as Goffman (1959) suggests, an individual is projecting a 'definition of the situation' in which the moral

character is invoked, they would have an expectation that others would value and treat them in an appropriate way.

Recognition of both the projection of the other and a concern for the other's position (even if it is not an agreeable one) will promote deep listening through which a level of equilibrium is maintained in the interaction as it authenticates the process, without necessarily agreeing with its content. When the question of exerting a moral position is employed in interaction one also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he/she does not appear to be, if one is to be treated as genuine in the encounter.

Even a simple handshake as a greeting is symbolic of many other responses. If you are Muslim and female you may feel constrained by modesty in your own religious practice not to shake hands, particularly with males, and non-Muslims. The provenance of the decision not to do so is arguable, but the reality of the situation we found within the group was a common assumption neither clearly religiously or culturally ascribed, that in the name of modesty shaking the hands of males was not an appropriate act. If then the 'definition of the situation' is disrupted by an uncomfortable encounter that might otherwise assume a greeting, how does the worker facilitate that? Our experience was to examine barriers and opportunities to normative interaction by addressing the potential religious and cultural dynamics known among the participants in the group and to reflect upon their personal positions in relation to contact. This included hand shakes, touching others as a friendly gesture by, for example, patting of the hand or shoulder or back, or holding an arm as part of a gesture. The symbolic meaning of which, in general, denotes friendship and comradeship, and yet in terms of interpretative processes in the group, could also symbolically represent unwanted attention or immodest action.

We explored where disruption of the definition of the situation occurred by examining what was verbalised as well as the non-verbal actions associated with it in role play and scenario building exercises. Through this, the protective practices group members put in place in their interactions were examined and

the implications for why this was the adopted strategy unpacked. What we found was the implicit desire of most people to 'manage impressions' being created in the interaction by employing tact. The rationale for this is generally to save the mutually formed agreement of the 'definition of the situation' to allow the smooth passage of the interaction and to safeguard any misplaced impression that might otherwise be received by any one or all the participants in any given interaction. This tactic is what Goffman (1959: 25) refers to as seeing modesty in one's claims and reasonableness in their projected expectations. Such practices more often than not work in an individual's favour to sustain positive interaction.

### ***Making sense of conceptions of the 'self' and identification***

In order to make sense of why people do what they do, we need to take account of the aspects of identification alluded to in Mead's (1934) conception of the 'self' as designated in common use of the words 'I' and 'me'. He describes the relationship as follows:

*The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized 'me', and then one reacts toward that as an 'I'. (Mead, 1934: 174)*

The 'to and fro' of this process allows internal interrogation as an 'I' and also the ability to see oneself as an 'object' that one perceives to have control over; a 'me'. The perception of others towards an individual self is reflected by our self-understanding, which recognises the social self only because of a realisation of how others in society have an influence over that individual self.

The subject of social interaction and how one sees oneself is affirmed not only by Goffman (1959; 1968; 1970; 1972) but also in the work of Charles Cooley (1922). Goffman uses a range of texts that deal with interaction using a 'dramaturgical metaphor', 'social order', and 'interaction ritual' to name but a few. Cooley, like Mead, sees the essence of the self as cognitive; 'in other

words a self is formed through knowledge acquired by mediated experience' (Best, 2003: 114). Mead acknowledges that the internalization of the attitudes of others is represented by the notion of the 'generalised other', and by contrast those with whom one is primarily socialized he refers to as 'significant others', which extends to partners, spouses and other close family members or friends. Cooley (1922) saw the interaction of people mediated as a 'looking glass', in what is called his 'Looking Glass Self'. He suggests there are three steps in the conception of his theory:

*1) That as human beings we look at our appearance from the perspective of the other, 2) we attempt to imagine the judgment of the other about us, and 3) we use the above information to develop feelings about our self, such as self-respect or embarrassment.*  
(Best, 2003: 114)

We are seen, Cooley conceives, and understand ourselves, as if we are looking in a mirror; the reflection is in the eyes of the person with whom we are in interaction. How we believe others perceive us shapes how we see ourselves, as if through their eyes. This is borne out by participant responses and is a significant factor when attempting to respond to the way individuals react within a group. An example of which is reflected in Zahid's comments below:

*It was quite important because I seen it [joining the youth forum] as an opportunity... a lot of people do not really know about the religion [Islam]. They will see a man with a beard and traditional clothes and they feel like whoa... 'I'm a bit wary of this person' you know because the media is propagating this image that all Muslims wear beards, they are extreme, they are fundamentalists, which we are not (Zahid, 2010).*

The quotation above exemplifies how one believes one's religious group to be perceived, and the consequence of how you understand yourself in relation to that perceived or imagined reality. We look at our appearance from the perspective of the other, attempt to imagine the judgment of the other about us, and use that information to develop feelings about our self, such as self-respect or embarrassment - both of which are reflected in the comments about media driven Muslim perceptions. In scenarios explored by the youth group, participants saw how they recognised the reaction of others but, more importantly, how their recognition was based on what they perceived the other to be thinking of them. The mirror image was a powerful tool around which definitions of the situation could be assessed.

Goffman (1959) uses a similar analogy where he explores the front stage actions of individuals and groups, explained as being in a public space, and the back stage actions in a more private space. In the latter there is less chance of losing face through embarrassment, or being stereotyped or stigmatized – another area where he researched the social world, in his work on asylums (1968). The social norms and consensual or constraining factors of any particular situation are managed to present the actor in the best possible light. This approach seeks to manage the interface between the 'self-image' and the 'public-image' (Wetherell, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

It is not enough simply to assert an identity (in a youth group or elsewhere), it must be validated, or not, by those with whom we have contact. While we can all control, to a degree, the signals we send out about ourselves, we are ultimately at a disadvantage as we cannot guarantee their correct reception or interpretation. For Goffman (1970) this is described as the 'interaction order'. Such an 'order', when understood by members of the DIYF, built confidence in individual and social selves which assisted with the smooth running of their many interactions. Goffman's own sense of selfhood is not undermined by what critics refer to as his failing to examine the authentic self beneath the performance. Rather, he adopts a response to the sense of 'a self' that he

suggests is both active and strategic, relying on the levels of belief an individual puts into his/her own sense of reality to locate an authentic self beneath the performance which he suggest is the 'strategic self in action'.

*His [Goffman's] goal in analysing these many forms of interaction was to study the ground rules, which people follow when carrying through their lines of action in situations which they share with others (Cheal, 2005: 149).*

This is precisely what the youth group had undertaken in their own efforts to establish their form of social order. It is important to note here that commonality has a part to play in the reconciliation of the 'ritual' that is 'everyday' social interaction. Social order is predicated on the veneration of commonality in interaction and it is that which, when reproduced, maintains order. When it comes to saving faces or 'managing impressions' people also co-operate to save each other's. As Goffman (1972) identified quite rightly, the majority of interaction is orderly with minimum conflict. This is generally true of the DIYF, outside of a few individual instances of one-on-one tension. The ground rules facilitate this pursuit of personal social situations with most people arriving at a working consensus on the 'definition of the situation'. Goffman concludes, however, that there is always the tendency that people do not always reach agreement based on the real feelings they hold, but will rather suppress their real feelings and beliefs and only express those others are likely to agree with. What is apparent with the DIYF was that the greater the connection and confidence of self-conception with others in the group (built up over time and with familiarity), the less likely were they to suppress their real feelings. Individuals did speak out where they felt it important to do so.

It is apparent that to understand how young people from diverse faith-based backgrounds understand themselves and others in a group is essential. They come to a group like the DIYF with a range of self-oriented and other-oriented

labels. Making sense of themselves as agents depends on recognition and/or rejection, acceptance or indifference to the 'groupings' they are associated and associate with. That can be constraining, for example, in relation to intergenerational tension because it is sometimes difficult to have conversations within familial groups about, for example, gendered or sexual identities. On the other hand, in-group experiences of a youth forum can facilitate (peer-to-peer and with workers) appropriate levels of debate. Similarly, the setting, ethos, ground rules, training opportunities and facilities made available in the context of the group, and the relationship building that flows from interaction, individually and in group settings, are empowering. They have developed conduct conducive to self-other understanding, respect and in-group affirmation leading to greater self-worth and self-esteem. This is as a direct consequence of awareness on the part of the workers and the participants of the opportunities and barriers presented by grounding interactions in mutually respecting personal encounter and exploring how that occurs. The learning from that experience removes the potential to 'other' and creates a personal space in which each has an authentic position, regardless of the issue and how banal or emotive it might be.

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